The university's new art center may not be ready to open its doors, but the mission is well underway.

At Broad and Belvidere streets, 32 traffic lanes converge where construction of the Institute for Contemporary Art is turning heads. Photo by Scott Elmquest
Alexa Saunders is on the bus, headed to her retail job at Short Pump Town Center. The 30-year-old wears a flouncy red blouse with a matching flower tucked in her black hair, Billie Holiday-style. On this oppressively hot day in July, she and her fellow GRTC passengers ride in quiet, lost in their thoughts.

But when Belvidere Street comes into view, Saunders suddenly jumps up, breaks the quiet and points enthusiastically to the jagged structure taking shape near the southwest corner of Broad and Belvidere.

“Oh, it’s going to be a sweet building,” she coos to her startled audience. “First came the sticks and then came the beams,” she preaches, as if introducing schoolchildren to the glories of reinforced-concrete construction.

“It’s going to be different for Richmond,” she says.

While Saunders may be among the more vocal, thousands of passersby have been intrigued by the mesmerizing rise of the new Institute for Contemporary Art, taking a dramatically angular form on the Monroe Park campus of Virginia Commonwealth University.

Although the 41,000-square-foot, $41.2 million complex won’t be completed until autumn next year, and may not be as large as other recent university buildings, already it packs a visual wallop.

The ICA, designed by Steven Holl Architects, is schedule to open in late 2017. Image provided by Steven Holl Architects.
The striking design is by Steven Holl Architects — New York-based and internationally renowned. Holl has major arts complexes also underway on the Princeton University campus, at the Houston Museum of Art and in Mumbai, India. The firm also is masterminding expansion of the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington.

“The ICA will be a landmark architecturally, a welcoming gateway and the front porch of VCU,” says Lisa Freiman, who left a top curatorial position at the Indianapolis Museum of Art three years ago when she was hired to become the fledgling institute’s founding director.

“And although there’s a gravitas to the building since we engaged an international architecture firm,” she says, “that decision wasn’t made to create an elitist institution.”

Instead, she says Holl was picked because it “would be sensitive to the site and produce a design that’s part and parcel of what’s happening at Broad and Belvidere.”

Freiman stresses that the building has two doors. “One door gestures toward Carver and Jackson Ward,” she says, “where the new Black History Museum has opened. And the other opens onto the Monroe Park campus. The building becomes a metaphor on issues that are important to the university. It’ll be a nexus for community engagement and conversations.”

This foreshadows how the institute will interact with the city, says curator Lauren Ross, who brings considerable experience in placing art in a densely populated urban setting as the former curator of the wildly successful High Line park in Manhattan.

“Richmond definitely has internal conflict,” Ross says. “We’re not going to shy away from questions that deal with Richmond’s interesting relationship with its history — those are very much on our radar.”
The ICA won't be a collecting institution. And building an iconic arts structure that embodies the spirit of civic engagement while handling ever-changing programs has been a challenge — especially at this site.

Put bluntly, Broad and Belvidere is an unlovely intersection. A chain drugstore, a vacant lot and a dorm — whose architecture can charitably be termed as thin — occupy the other three corners. A Sunoco service station is next door. And the site overlooks one of the city's busiest crossroads: 32 traffic lanes converge. Highway ramps leading to two interstates are only three blocks away.

Considering such a surrounding environment, the intuitive solution might have been to build a bunkerlike art gallery of considerable mass to solidify and anchor the site.

But by all indications, the Holl complex will possess both heft and fancy. The ICA front facade might well become an abstract, 21st-century take on a Roman triumphal arch and, as such, be heroic and welcoming.
The gallery’s wings, extending from the entrance forum, will spread outward like fork prongs to embrace the campus spatially. And although the institute’s exterior walls are depicted as bright white in architectural renderings, the exterior will be sheathed in a gray titanium-zink cladding, shifting in hue with the changing daylight.

“Holl attempts to renegotiate rather than subvert the rules of the city,” says Francesco Garofalo, a professor of architecture in Pescara, Italy, who’s written of the firm’s work.

Workmen swarm daily over the site, playing catch-up from construction issues that have slowed its completion, caused by a range of factors. These included ridding the site of buried oil drums, an auto bay and other industrial debris — once, a trainyard and later, used-car lots occupied the site.

More than 40 thermal wells were drilled and installed to depths of 600 feet for geothermal heating and cooling systems. Yes, this building will be "green."

Then, because the decision to add a basement was made after plans for the already structurally complex building were approved, a partial redesign was necessary.
Because construction is financed by private sources, the university required the ICA to have the bulk of that capital campaign completed before ground could be broken. The museum is now less than $2 million short of a $36.8 million goal. A separate endowment campaign also is underway. Salaries are a combination of university and private funding.

What isn’t visible to those passing by the construction site is the flurry of activity being orchestrated by director Freiman and her still-growing staff as they push methodically toward opening day, a little more than a year off.

It’s a tough order because organizers, the university and the staff itself expect a world-class arts institution from day one.

Command central for the operation is a re-purposed, one-story storefront a block from the construction site. Its facade is painted a gradation of colors in the same tonal range — from warm purples to blasts of red — that brand the institute’s carefully calibrated promotional material.
Inside, in cramped but cheerful offices, the staff is organizing exhibitions and installations — from intimate to sweeping in scale.

The ICA is an independent institution that falls under the purview of Provost Gail Hackett, the university’s chief academic officer. Interdisciplinary programs are being formulated to link the institute with other schools and programs across a wide range of disciplines on the 31,000-student campus.

Beyond campus, collaborations with local groups and those farther afield are in the works. Community educational programming and outreach are also priorities.

And then there are additional decisions to be made about ongoing fundraising, publications, branding, signage design and parking. Even the selection of a caterer and menu selections for the planned cafe are under discussion.

“There are still so many questions about the building,” says Ross, whose curatorial résumé before coming to the ICA in 2014 also included the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, as well as the High Line.

“There will be four primary exhibition spaces,” she says, “so what keeps me up at night are questions about how many exhibitions will we have each year and what sort of program functions best in a particular space. For instance, there could be one large show that takes up all the space. And how do we use ancillary spaces and program the 250-seat auditorium with live performances and lectures?”

A dramatic staircase will be a feature of the forum, at the sweeping entry of the ICA. Image provided by Steven Holl Architects.
The institute has jump-started its programs by presenting major exhibitions before its building opens. Last year Ross curated “New Dominion,” a well-received show in New York of works by eight Richmond artists that dealt subtly with themes of tension, loyalty and community.

Earlier this year the institute presented “Nir Evron: Projected Claims.” The installation featured work by an Israeli conceptual artist working in photography and film, and was shown at the Depot, a university multipurpose building on West Broad Street. Evron also had an artist-in-residency in the School of the Arts’ photography and film department.

Although the ICA is tight-lipped about the opening slate of exhibitions and programs planned for the new building, there’s a lot going on.

Late last month, the institute’s director of education and community engagement, Johanna Plummer — who has worked in the education programs at both the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art in Hartford, Connecticut, and the ICA in Philadelphia — took Chicago-based artist Deb Sokolow on a whirlwind tour of Richmond.

Sokolow has been commissioned to create one of the institute’s major inaugural pieces. Her conceptual and interactive work might seek to position the Holl-designed building among Richmond’s other architectural landmarks in lively, witty and unexpected ways.

On what was Sokolow’s first visit to Richmond, Plummer waltzed her around town on an immersive fact-finding tour that included picking the brains of Craig Reynolds, director of the Branch Museum of Architecture and Design, Bill Martin, director of the Valentine museum, and VCU librarians.

They also met with staff at BCWH Architects, the Richmond-based associate architect for the ICA. Among the city’s spectacular 19th-century architectural gems they examined were the whimsical Egyptian Building and the adjacent stoic Monumental Church, both on the university’s medical campus.

When asked how she would fuse local people and places in her piece, Sokolow laughs and says, “I have no idea.”

In addition to interdisciplinary collaborations on the campus, the ICA will target teenage audiences as an ongoing programmatic focus. Earlier this summer, Plummer worked with four rising high-school senior participants in the Cochrane Summer Economic Institute, which is administered by Collegiate School. They researched and examined programs for teens at art institutions in other parts of the country.
“We have an opportunity to help the next generation come of age and to help them for the rest of their lives,” director Freiman says. “There is substantial evidence that exposure to contemporary art builds skills that can be used for critical thinking. And exposure to people who are really thinking about things and engaging with artists is valuable. The ICA will be a window on the world. It will reflect how complex the world is, and how that complexity can be seen through art.” As for the team of museum staffers she’s assembled, Freiman is proud.

“Everyone loves the fact that this is a once-in-a lifetime opportunity,” she says. “Everything is so complex, but they all chose to come here to be a part of this cultural birth. Everyone has given not just time, but money. They understand that this is a gift to future generations.”

Two of the ICA’s founders and biggest benefactors are Bill and Pam Royall, prominent art collectors. Bill Royall says he’s been impressed with the buildup.

“In just three years Lisa has firmly established herself in Richmond,” he says. “And drawing on her distinguished leadership in the contemporary art world, she has recruited an extraordinary staff.”

*Lisa Freiman came to Richmond after a successful tenure at the Indianapolis Museum of Art. Photo by Scott Elmquist.*
For Freiman, 49, the path to giving birth to a contemporary art institution was laid in her small, middle-class hometown of Scotch Plains, New Jersey.

The bedroom town is 35 miles west of New York and is rich in Revolutionary War-era history as well as ethnic diversity. Her family owned and operated Park Pharmacy, which also sold liquor — legal in that state, Freiman notes. The store fronted Park Avenue, the town’s main street, and customers affectionately called her father Doc when they sought his advice.

Growing up, Freiman pitched in by working the register, handling billing, placing orders and decorating the store windows. But most important, she says, it was in the store that she learned to connect.

“[I] got to know everyone and to understand the fabric of the community — about cultural differences, race and being respectful,” she says. “I learned how to communicate. Everything I learned about life was through that community storefront.”

Later at Oberlin college, Freiman studied medieval and Renaissance art history and studio art. After graduation, she left Ohio for Boston, where she supported herself with two jobs. One was full-time at an outreach program for at-risk teenagers that focused on developing skills, engaged them in a myriad activities and provided role models.

Some of the youngsters had arrest records, others had been pregnant. “A few of the students were really tough, but were babies in other ways,” she says. “They liked that we were strict with them, that we had rules.”

It was her second job, on evenings and weekends, that became a bridge to her life in contemporary art.

Freiman was a part-time gallery supervisor at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston, then operating out of a former firehouse. That evolved into a full-time manager position, but after a year of handling front-of-house operations she grew bored. Learning that the curatorial assistant was leaving, she sought and got the job, despite never having studied contemporary art.

“That’s why I have a true compassion for people who don’t have a passion for contemporary art,” she says, having come to the field inadvertently herself.

It was also while in Boston that Freiman met her husband, Ed Coleman, who was working toward a master’s degree in theological studies at Harvard University. They were married in 1995. Today, he teaches high-school English, and the couple has two
daughters, ages 10 and 12.

In Boston, Freiman soon found her curatorial job a “dead end.” She realized that to become a leader in her field would require an advanced degree. So from 1993 to 2001 she and her husband lived in Atlanta where she received a doctorate at Emory University and was an assistant professor of art history at the University of Georgia. He was getting a master’s degree in arts of teaching at Emory.

Then, rebuking the common thinking that all roads in the art world lead to New York, Freiman took a counterintuitive approach. A mentor, Matthew Teitelbaum, now director of Boston’s Museum of Fine Arts, urged her not to go straight to the Big Apple, but to a smaller city. “He told me that this approach would open up my mind to different things and experiences,” she says.

This led to a job at the Indianapolis Museum of Art where she served as chairwoman of the contemporary art department. Freiman says she flourished there precisely because it wasn’t at the center of the art world and it wasn’t a cutthroat environment. Among her challenges was reinstalling 25,000 square feet of gallery space.

Another highlight of her tenure was developing what’s become the Virginia B. Fairbanks Art & Nature Park: 100 Acres. It is a natural riverfront preserve that includes commissioned works that relate to the environment. Many pieces are interactive. “That put Indianapolis on the map,” Freiman says, “nationally and internationally.”

Among the still-growing senior staff are Lauren Ross, Johanna Plummer, Michael Lease, Lisa Freiman, Traci Garland and Alexandra Crawford. Photo by Scott Elmquist.
About the same time she was chosen by the State Department as commissioner and curator the U.S. pavilion for the 2011 Venice Biennale, one of the world’s longest-running and most influential international art events. “It was the best time of my career,” she says of the combined experiences. “But after Venice I was physically and mentally exhausted.”

Freiman contemplated her next move and was courted by a number of museums across the country. But it was the position in Richmond that caught her attention.

“The No. 1 reason was VCU Arts,” she says. “I was aware of the program and its prestige. It was also an unexpected place for a powerhouse to be operating. It signaled a kind of broader ambition and expectations over all in Richmond of how the ICA would tie to the city and beyond.”

Second, she says when she first saw renderings of the Holl proposed for the institute, she told a colleague, “This is my next job.”

By chance, she was invited to the university to judge the annual undergraduate student art exhibition. “VCU was not only producing good students and the faculty was top notch,” she says, “but I spent time with them and they were really decent human beings, down-to-earth.”

“Timing is everything,” she says.

And what has Freiman found most since moving? “I am surprised that for the size of the city, it never gets boring,” she says. “Something is always happening. I travel around the world and for the size of the city, the cultural breadth is terrific.”

With the Institute for Contemporary Art, Richmond might be on the verge of becoming more so.

As Royall says, “We are positioned for the 2017 opening and becoming a widely recognized venue for some of the most advanced programs in contemporary art.”

“The ICA will bring in the most interesting artists and bring diversity to a whole new level,” Freiman promises. “All people will be welcome, admission will be free and there will be a standing invitation to anyone who wants to walk through that door.”